

VISION 21 IMPLEMENTATION COMMITTEE

Meeting Minutes

February 2, 2006

Accepted March 2, 2006

Members Present: Austin Bliss, Donna Brescia, Victoria Haase, Meg O'Brien, Jennifer Page, Ann Rittenburg, Paul Santos, Paul Solomon, Jay Szklut, Vinnie DeNovellis

Also in attendance: Delores Keefe; Scott Stratford (School Committee)

Members absent: Sara Oaklander

1. Administrivia

- Jennifer called meeting to order at 7:05pm
- Meeting minutes of January 19, 2006 were adopted unanimously after two minor edits.
- Scott Stratford was introduced to the Committee.

2. Education in Belmont

Introduction: Jennifer explained that the Vision 21 Implementation Committee has had a significant turnover, and thus we are proceeding with a review of all our major topics of focus. From our discussion with Scott, we hope to learn about the challenges to traditional K-12 education as well as other educational challenges. The committee has reviewed the "Report from the Superintendent's Task Force on Communicating the Challenges Facing the Belmont Public Schools" and would like to discuss that report with Scott as well as the Belmont Community Education program.

Scott's Background: Scott has served on the School Committee for ten years. He has also been the School Committee liaison to the Community Education group for ten years; he acknowledged that Vinnie has been a long-term member of the Superintendent's Advisory Council on Community Education and so may also have information to share.

2.1 K-12 Education

Report Background: In fall '05, Dr. Holland established a task force to figure out how to better communicate to the community at large the challenges faced by the Belmont Public Schools. The central idea behind the resulting report is to ensure that ideas are presented coherently, visibility is boosted and support obtained. Scott handed out a PowerPoint presentation of the report and walked us through the slides.

Report Synopsis: "Our school system is caught between the pressure of ever-increasing expectations, on the one hand, and steadily increasing financial, political, social, and developmental concerns on the other."

Some Details:

- Belmont Schools no longer use the 'sage on a stage' model of education. Students learn in different ways and need to be taught in different ways.
- Massachusetts Education Reform Act sets a rigorous standard. Every student is being held to the constraint equivalent to being able to apply to Mass Bay Community College.

- Behavioral problems must be addressed before the learning can begin, and Belmont schools are finding that this is an increasing issue. The socio-economic pressures on families also mean kids come to school less ready to do the work they need to do. Principals are seeing more and more kids coming to school with serious behavioral issues.
- One in every five families has students in the Belmont Public Schools.
- No one budget cycle can resolve these problems. This is a multi-year challenge.

The PowerPoint was dated January 10, 2006. It is being presented to various PTA meetings. The School Committee is planning to do a series of op-eds in the paper, as well as tailored presentations to various groups, in order to inform the public of the issues and generate discussion.

Questions & Discussion:

- Question: What is different about this problem, rather than other times the school system has struggled with a similar problem? Scott feels the legal mandates and universal proficiency standard make this challenge unique from all previous challenges.
- Question: What is the “punishment” if standards are not met? Scott said we could be found “underachieving.” Progress must be shown every year, even if you are at 93%.
- Question: What percentage of kids receives special ed.? Scott believes it is 14%.
- Scott shared the school does not have trouble getting the union to support volunteers w/in the school system
- Approximately 100 students are ‘English language learners’.
- The school does not have special programs to connect to the business community. Donna felt this would be good for the community at large.
- Scott said the curriculum developers review the curriculum every seven years.
- Scott shared that Belmont already spends less per pupil than most school systems.
- Belmont receives less per-pupil in state aid than nearly all other communities, which makes the budget challenges greater.
- Jay suggested VIC could help support volunteerism in the school system
- Jay raised the question of why we need to spend more on administration. Scott argued spending was below a sustainable point, and without some increase standards can’t be maintained.
- While retirement rates and ‘churn’ in new hires is a challenge, there are no data to know if turnover is unusually high in Belmont versus other school systems.
- Retired teachers are allowed to work w/in the school system w/o jeopardizing their pension.
- V21 could be extraordinarily helpful in helping to highlight the issues of the schools.

2.2. Adult Education

Overview by Scott:

- Director of program is also the High School Librarian, Martha Reagan.
- Three or four times a year Ms Reagan convenes the Superintendent’s Advisory Council for Community Education to develop the next year’s program.
- Trend has been to have more classes of shorter duration, as they have found people can’t commit to longer blocks of time.
- There is a limited budget for promotion, so the Council uses vibrant colors on the cover so the books don’t get “lost.”

- The Advisory Council is always looking for ideas to improve their operations; they seek to bring in new ideas and new people to get involved.
- Program generates a modest amount of cash, e.g. donated \$10k to computer equipment a few years ago. The funds tend to aggregate over a few years and then the Council recommends spending the surplus, usually in ways that help the program.

Discussion:

- The program offerings are not currently tied into Minuteman offerings; Paul Santos noticed there was some overlap.
- Paul Santos suggested that some offerings be added that are unique to Belmont, as a way to generate more interest in the program. For example, 'How does town government work?'
- Donna asked if there were an adult literacy interest. She also suggested GED or prep/tutoring classes.
- We discussed pricing of the courses and learned it was fairly competitive. The Council has not done tiered pricing, and anyone can take classes. There is no residency requirement to enroll.

Summary Thoughts for Scott:

- Paul Santos suggested that VIC could get much more involved in helping to promote the school committee report. For example, a docu-drama of a sample life-in-the-day
- Victoria shared that she represents an organization that feels totally shut out from partnering with the school system. For example, the Historical Society wants the schools to get involved in a 'local history day', but has not been successful.
- Donna suggested VIC could help to do some marketing.
- Paul Solomon recommended that Scott follow the same path as the original Vision creation, i.e. gather people and ask them "What is your perception of the school system". The focus should be on listening rather than telling. Paul feels like we are at 'the tipping point' in this town and we need to get a dialogue going with a few small groups.

We all thanked Scott for sharing his presentation and ideas with us. We can direct further questions and ideas to Ann, as she is our liaison to the School Committee.

3. Welcoming Booklet

Victoria has spoken to the printer and unfortunately the budget for his department is closed for the year. This means he will need payment up-front, estimated 5,000 copies will cost \$2,400 for paper supplies. We would also have to pay the bindery directly, as it is done offsite. Victoria will get prices for binding and a sense of the timeline. Meg suggested that Victoria confirm that all transportation costs are included (as job needs to be transported from printer to binder) Homework for VIC is to get copies of our booklet to Victoria with any changes/suggestions/etc.

4. Environmental matters:

4.1 Update: Sustainable Belmont: Tufts students, public forums, Climate Action Plan

Five Tufts graduate students are serving as environmental "consultants" to Sustainable Belmont, courtesy of a proposal that Ann Stewart (Paul Santos' wife) submitted. Last evening, the students attended a meeting of Sustainable Belmont. It is amazing to think that the first meeting of Sustainable Belmont was a year ago: February 9th, 2005. They have accomplished a lot in relatively little time.

4.2 ZBA hearings on Uplands: Input from Vision Committee

Jennifer encouraged people to contribute their comments to the Zoning Board of Appeals on the proposed construction under 40-B at the Uplands. There has been a suggestion that the Vision Committee may want to weigh in on this, particularly on how the construction may conform to the Vision. It has been suggested that sustainability should be a criterion for construction under 40-B. The first round of comments are due Feb 9th, and Jennifer asks that we give her support to the comments she writes, although the timeframe would not allow elaborate edit and discussion.

- Paul Santos encouraged the committee to push for assuring the affordability of the units.
- Donna pointed out that a classic mistake is that in affordable housing they put in electric heat, as it is inexpensive to install but expensive to operate.
- Jay reminded the team to be specific when we suggest comments.

4.3 Request from Conservation Commission regarding proposed by-law

The Conservation Commission is proposing a new wetlands bylaw and would like some time in our next meeting to talk to us about it. Jennifer will forward materials that they have prepared; members are urged to read them in preparation for our next meeting..

5. Town Report

Jennifer distributed a draft of the “Vision Committee” piece she has written for the 2005 Town Report; she invited members to review it; comments are due by this weekend.

6. Changes to the proposed schedule of topics.

- February 16: (a) revisiting the vision, (b) welcoming booklet, and (c) Conservation Commission by-law.
- March 2: “Business” meeting #2

7. Others:

Town survey? Ann raised the issue that in the upcoming town budget, there is a line item for a town-wide survey. We need to get a better sense of what that is.

Next Meeting: Thursday, February 16, 2006 from 7-9pm

The meeting was adjourned at 9:03 pm

Respectfully submitted,
Austin C. Bliss
Secretary Pro Tempore